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Asymmetry and Systemic Misperception: China, Vietnam and Cambodia during the 1970s

BRANTLY WOMACK

While the differences between the perspectives of countries disparate in size and power provide fertile ground for the individual misperceptions analyzed by Robert Jervis in his seminal work, the imbalance of vulnerability between the stronger and weaker sides in an asymmetric relationship can also create systemic misperceptions. The structurally based misperceptions of each side have a negative complementarity, that is, they will tend to produce a vicious circle in which the interpretation of the actions of the other side becomes further and further removed from the other side's subjective intentions, and negotiation breaks down. The constraints on asymmetric misperceptions are very different from the 'golden rule' because treating another as oneself is premised on reciprocity. The management of asymmetric relationships is based in part on the neutralization of issue areas by means of inclusive rhetoric and routinization and in part on creating a sleeve of normalcy for transactions through precedent and diplomatic ritual. Structural misperception is illustrated by considering two extreme dyads, that of China and Vietnam in the 1970s and that of Vietnam and Cambodia in the same period. These dyads are particularly interesting because Vietnam is in the weaker position in one and in the stronger position in the other, and it behaved according to its different dyadic positions.

O wad some Pow'r the giftie gie us
To see oursels as others see us!

Robert Burns

An asymmetric bilateral relationship is not simply one in which each side brings vastly different capacities and vulnerabilities to the negotiating table. The difference in capacity creates a difference in perspective. From the vantage point of the weaker side (B), the stronger side has to be watched carefully because of the salience of the opportunities and risks that it presents. From the vantage point of the stronger side (A), the weaker side does not by itself present much opportunity or risk in comparison to other, 'more important' relationships. What appears to be a bilateral relationship between A and B is in fact a bundle of two quite different relations, a relatively intense one from B to A and a less intense one from A to B.

The Journal of Strategic Studies, Vol. 26, No. 2 (June 2003) pp.92–119
PUBLISHED BY FRANK CASS, LONDON

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The purpose of this article is to set forth a basic structural model for analyzing asymmetric dyads. It begins with patterns of attention and behavior related to disparity. It then considers characteristic, complementary patterns of systemic misperception arising from the different poles of the dyad, and the moderating forces that constrain misperception. Finally, cases will be analyzed that are indisputably asymmetric and that present extreme illustrations of the model. Many interesting and vexed questions of international relations and of social science in general touch on this discussion, such as the dimensions and measurement of power, the nature of collective ideas and state actors, the international situation of small states, and relations of domination and subordination. However, for the sake of clarity, we concentrate here on the main thread of the argument.

Asymmetric dyads are distinguished from symmetric dyads, in which the two sides are – and view one another as – roughly equal in capacity. The problem of relations between states with fundamentally different political systems – liberal and illiberal states, to take the most popular example – is a different story.[1] The relationship across political systems is more a disjunctive one rather than an asymmetrical one. Each may see the other as alien and more likely to be hostile, but these expectations could well be mirror images of one another, and certainly the states could have equal capacities. One would expect that political disjunction would exacerbate whatever difficulties were intrinsic to an asymmetric relationship because disjunction would add another dimension of potential suspicion and misunderstanding. However, as the cases analyzed below demonstrate, it is possible to have severe problems of asymmetric misperceptions in relationships without a political disjunction.

The first half of the article presents a general theory of the effect of disparity on perception. The differences in capacities in an asymmetric relationship imply different stakes in the relationship. Different stakes imply different patterns of attention. The weaker side will be proportionally more interested, and therefore it will tend to be more coordinated and anticipatory in its relational behavior. The greater attentiveness and adroitness of the weaker side is not based on a misperception of the relationship, but rather on the realities of its perspective. However, precisely because B is more attentive to the relationship, it will tend to misjudge A's less coherent and more distracted behavior as intentional. It will exaggerate A's malevolence and tend toward paranoia. On the other side, A may attempt to push B back into line, but eventually it will view B as a grand challenger to its stature. These errors of over-attention on B's part and of inattention on A's part tend to reinforce one another, since B's increasingly desperate actions are easily taken as bolder challenges by A, while A's growing hostility is extrapolated into mortal threat by B.

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Asymmetric misperception is systemic because it results from a relational pattern rather than from the characteristics of individual states and their leaders. It is not an aggregation of individual 'mistakes', but rather a disposition typical to the A or B position in an asymmetric relationship that will affect a state's leadership, its media and its population as a whole. Asymmetric relations are common, though not universal, and moreover many medium-sized countries are simultaneously in the A and in the B position in different relations. However, it is not proposed as a corollary of a general systems theory, but rather as an explanation of a common thread in the texture of international relations.

Controlling systemic misperception is not easy. Normally, one could appeal to the 'golden rule' of understanding and treating the other as oneself, but in an asymmetric relationship the golden rule is precisely the root of the problem. B thinks of A as a huge B, just as engaged in the relationship as it is, but with much more power. A thinks of B as a tiny A, with distance and discretion in the relationship and yet choosing to behave in challenging ways. Controlling structural misperceptions, therefore, does not rely on the internal control of reciprocity but rather on external mechanisms that create a strong sleeve of normal expectations for both sides and neutralize areas of possible conflict.

The second half of the article illustrates the rather abstract presentation of the model by analyzing in some detail two cases of asymmetry, that of the deterioration of relations between China and Vietnam in the 1970s, and that of the virtually simultaneous decline in relations between Vietnam and Cambodia. The high degree of discipline in communist foreign policy behavior accentuated the effects of systemic misperception in all three countries. These dyads are particularly interesting because Vietnam is in the weaker position in one and in the stronger position in the other. Although the cases were interrelated and the Vietnamese decision makers were the same in both, simultaneous venues, Vietnam behaved according to its different dyadic positions. Vietnam was, so to speak, Cambodia to China, and at the same time China to Cambodia.

Asymmetry and its Consequences

An asymmetric relationship is not *eo ipso* hostile or pathological. Countries with great disparities of size and power have long lived side by side in relative tranquility and have arbitrated differences. To call the relationship between the United States and Canada 'imbalanced' might imply that that a symmetric relationship would be more normal, when in fact it is difficult to imagine what balancing might mean. Clearly asymmetry must be accepted as a permanent feature of some relationships, and as a common feature of

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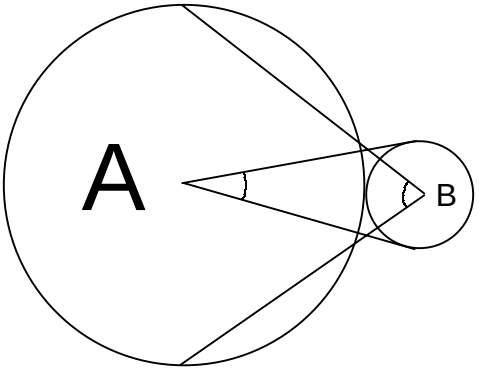
the general matrix of international relations. Moreover, a disparity of power does not mean that the more powerful simply dominates the less powerful. The name 'Vietnam' should be a rueful reminder of that fact to an American, French or Chinese audience. So an asymmetric relation can be a normal, long-term situation, and the diplomatic task for each side is to make it of mutual benefit. However, to the extent that a bilateral relation is asymmetric, the modalities of its management and the characteristics of its pathology will tend to differ from those of symmetric relations. Patterns of attention and relative status will differ depending on which side of the asymmetry one stands.

Although the task of this article is not to pose a general challenge to the systems approach of neo-realism, it should be noted that it differs in its concerns and approach. To be sure, Kenneth Waltz asserts that 'international politics is mostly about inequalities'.[2] But a significant disparity of capacity is a reason for disinterest in a relationship rather than a focus of attention. Waltz's next sentence is: 'So long as the major states are the major actors, the structure of international politics is defined in terms of them.' So the inequalities that are of interest are conditions of flux between major powers who use balancing and bandwagoning to pursue security, and the 'major powers' are those for whom current inequality is remediable. For the relations between the strong and the weak, Waltz has neo-Melian words of wisdom: 'Weakness invites control; strength tempts one to exercise it, if only for the "good" of other people.'[3] Thus, he concludes, 'viewed as the politics of the powerful, international politics can be studied in terms of the logic of small-number systems'.[4]

Neo-realism reflects a long-established tendency of international relations theory to take the interaction of great powers, and especially their

FIGURE 1
ASYMMETRIC ATTENTION



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wars, as the primary object of study. And yet, as Waltz repeatedly observes, 'the death rate among states is remarkably low',[5] and, given their number and the variety of their capacities, the stable population implies, first, that states are usually unable or unwilling to eliminate one another, and that, second, most diplomacy must take place between states of different capacities. Waltz is correct that states are not in formal relations of hierarchy, and yet they exist in a stable hieratic matrix[6] of differing capacities. Waltz argues that without world government states must all have the same self-help function and thus their differences are irrelevant to systemic theory. I argue that the international hieratic matrix creates a diversity of situations in which systemic patterns of politics can be discerned.

Figure 1 illustrates the basic fact of asymmetry, namely, that A is far more of a presence to B than vice versa.[7] Regardless of whether the current relationship is friendly or hostile, A simply fills more of B's international horizon. And given that B has a smaller domestic mass, international concerns are likely to be a larger part of its overall interests. As with symmetric relations, the intensity of asymmetric relations usually varies inversely with distance. If the distance between A and B is increased, then the overall salience of the relationship is reduced, and consequently the effect of the disparity is lessened.[8] However, distancing oneself from ones neighbors is normally not an option, so asymmetric relations between neighboring countries provide the clearest examples of structural effects.

If A is a much larger part of B's world, then B will be more attentive to A, and its pattern of attention in the bilateral relation will differ from A's. Even in a peaceful, primarily economic relationship there are risks as well as benefits, and these will be proportionately larger and therefore more vivid to B. Smaller scale means that the same magnitude of profit or loss will be a larger percentage of the whole. The entire leadership of B will be attentive to A, not just its 'A experts'. Policy toward A is likely to be coordinated and sensitive to A's reactions. Even if the relationship is benign, B will sleep with its 'A eye' open, because A's raw capacity creates a latent vulnerability for B regardless of A's current intentions.

By contrast, even if B were the next largest country in A's universe, A would have less interest in the relationship than vice versa, because proportionally A would have less to gain or lose. Therefore high levels of attention to B are likely to be episodic and focused on specific issues, while in normal times only those parts of A with a special interest in B will be attentive. Moreover, the general leadership of A will not have a high common level of expertise on B, so when an issue arises or a crisis occurs, their attention will be shaped by the problem at hand and by expert advice. Finally, in ordinary times, the special interests resident in A that are

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involved with B are not likely to be harmonious in their attempts to influence A's attitude toward B. Not only will there be differences of interest and opinion regarding national policy as a whole, but there will be efforts to secure the specific policy footholds most relevant to specific interests. So the whole range of A's official behavior toward B is likely to be less coordinated and less coherent than vice versa, while changes in the articulation of national policy toward B are likely to be less frequent and more sluggish because A's leadership does not have the same coordination and sense of urgency about the relationship that B's leadership does.

Just as patterns of attention differ in asymmetric relations, so too do sensitivities regarding relative status. Status sensitivities are more elusive than patterns of attention because of the official equality of sovereign units in the modern world[9] and because status involves a relative sense of self that is rarely articulated. Nevertheless, the question, 'Who am I in relation to this other, and what is this other to me?' is implicit in addressing a relationship, and from the two ends of an asymmetric relationship the answers will be different.

The question of relative status is a more painful one to B, and therefore less likely to be explicit.[10] Status-equalizing aspects of the relationship, such as common memberships in multilateral associations and exchanges of state visits, are likely to be far more important to B than to A. Within the relationship B strives for acknowledgement of its autonomy. Beyond the bilateral relationship itself, B can increase its sense of relative status by enhancing its collective identity with other states. It can also decrease its sense of status disparity by calling attention to the problems and deficiencies of A. If, as in the case of Britain and Ireland, there is another, more distant country (C) of greater power than A, then any disparity between A and C will be observed with pleasure by B. To go one step further, B's good relations with countries stronger than A give B a sense of status security even if no military bond is involved. Although B's relation with C is even more asymmetric than its relation with A, it relieves the tension of the more urgent relation with A by complicating the status picture.

While B's status objective within the relationship is acknowledgement, A's status objective is deference. Deference does not necessarily require submissive behavior. The minimum standard for deference is that B pursues its interests in a manner that is respectful of A's relative status. A does not need the respect for autonomy that acknowledgement implies because it does not feel that its autonomy can be endangered by B alone. However, A does want B to be deferential, because deference implies that B accepts the asymmetry of the relationship. If B is dissatisfied with asymmetry and desires equality or balance with A, this could lead it to (from A's viewpoint)

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foolish, reckless or collusive behavior. In principle, therefore, the status interests of A and B are not incompatible, but they are different. In good times, A could acknowledge B's autonomy and B could show that it did not question the asymmetry of the relationship. But in a tense situation, if B's behavior were premised on a demand for autonomy while A demanded deference, the objective of each side would appear to exclude the minimum requirement of the other.

Besides A's expectation of deference from B, A's sense of relative status affects its own behavior towards B. In normal times the relationship is not an urgent one for A, so A will tend to feel that it is being gracious and/or acting according to principle in giving attention or acknowledgements to B. Slights to B will be perhaps unintentional but often accurate indications of the lesser importance that A attaches to the relationship. In concrete disputes A will be tempted to bully B by putting its hand on its hilt or by linking the matter under dispute with more important concerns. Since A does not feel vulnerable to B alone, what would be an act of war toward an equal becomes (from A's vantage point) a sanction or a 'lesson'. For example, it would be hard to imagine an event like the 1989 American invasion of Panama and capture of General Noriega occurring between Germany and France without inducing subsequent hostilities.

Climates of friendship or hostility make a greater difference in asymmetric relations than in symmetric ones. By 'climate' I mean the general framing of the relationship in contrast to the day-to-day interactions. If the overall climate of the relationship is friendly, then the advantages of the relationship will be felt more acutely by B and probably pursued more adroitly as well. Since B is more attentive to A and more coordinated in its policy, it is better positioned to exploit the nooks and crannies of the relationship. Even if A perceives unfairness, it is likely to be slower to respond because of the lower urgency of the matter from its perspective and therefore the greater effort of coming to a decision. The graciousness of the powerful often covers the gap between the perception of an unfair advantage to the weaker and the difficulty of making the effort to redress a small matter.

A climate of hostility in an asymmetric relation presents an entirely different picture. *Schadenfreude* replaces graciousness as A's ruling passion; A hardly notices the recoil of sanctions against B because the damage to B is so much more evident. The diversity of A's relations to B imply that there will be voices in A for the amelioration of hostility, but the most self-satisfying policy direction is to force B to deference. Meanwhile, on B's side the hostility with A is a mortal threat to autonomy and survival. The community must be rallied against the threat, and those who are thought to be compromised in their allegiance must be isolated or removed. Within the

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bilateral relationship, the leadership of B will try to frame and contain the threat implicit in sanctions, but it will also be sensitive to any concessions regarding autonomy, however small or symbolic.

Armed conflict will exacerbate the contradiction between deference and autonomy. Typically the conflict will occur on B's territory, and it will demonstrate both A's destructive capacity (and therefore – from A's point of view – the rationale for deference) and the mortal threat to B's community (and therefore – from B's point of view – the impossibility of surrender). Outside the bilateral relationship, B will be anxious to equalize the asymmetry through alliances and appeals to international public opinion. However, for any third party the question of partnering with B in a climate of hostility will ultimately be one of its desired relationship with A and only residually a question of its relationship with B, because in general the relationship with A will be more important to a third party.

The transition from friendship to hostility is also affected by asymmetry. Even when it perceives what it views as an unwelcome or even hostile policy trend on B's part, A is likely to move slowly in changing general policy even as its own specific signals and tit for tat responses become more harsh. The change of A's posture from irritable friendship to hostility usually requires an incident that is taken as an affront to A's status, honor and power, such as the seizure of American hostages in Iran, or a reframing of relations with B as part of some larger crisis worthy of A's attention, such as the American claim of Cuban and Soviet presence in Nicaragua in the early 1980s. When the general threshold of hostility is crossed it will trigger an avalanche of hostile acts in excess of tit for tat responses to B's acts. Once A moves into a general climate of hostility toward B, it will be at least as difficult for A to make the transition in the other direction back to friendship. Even if A is frustrated in its attempts to compel B's deference, it will feel no obligation to accept B's autonomy. After all, even passive hostility will hurt B worse than it hurts A, and the pain of one's enemy is the most tangible measure of satisfaction in a non-threatening hostile relationship. Moreover, the anticipated gain from normalization of relations with B might not seem worth the effort and the domestic costs of a major policy change. An example would be American relations with Iran under the Clinton administration, which drifted toward and away from normalization several times.

By contrast, the points of transition from friendship to hostility are not so prominent from B's perspective. Because B is always vulnerable to A's raw capacity, its attitude toward A is sensitive to small changes in the tension of the relationship. B will begin preparing for hostility with A long before A would finally declare hostility. Until hostility is declared, B's aggressiveness may lead to relative gains with A and thereby prompt further

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probing. But if B goes one step too far and A changes its general posture, then that step cannot be taken back. Similarly, in a climate of hostility B could be expected to be more motivated and alert to signaling for limitations in mutual threat and eventually for normalization.[11] Normalization implies acknowledgement of autonomy, and B is likely to be more willing to forget past injuries and present hostility in order to achieve it. But after the official change of climate to normalization, B's awareness of its continuing vulnerability – including new vulnerabilities created by its exposure to A's larger economy – will make it more cautious than A in the new era.

It should be noted that the above discussion of asymmetric perspectives does not involve misperception. If an asymmetric relationship exists, then the attention patterns, relative status, climatological concerns and characteristic behaviors of A and B will differ. From the point of view of a disinterested third party it might appear that both sides have distorted postures, but that is the product of switching the standpoint of judgement from that of the participants to one of distance and disinterest. The third party is not telling A how to be a more reasonable A and B how to be a more reasonable B, but rather telling both of them to stop playing the asymmetry game. But asymmetry appears to be optional only from a distance.

Structural Misperception

Although asymmetry is not itself a misperception, the fundamental fact that A is not to B as B is to A makes misperception more likely than in symmetric relationships. Moreover, the structure of the relationship induces a characteristic pattern in misperceptions.[12] The stronger side will tend toward errors of inattention[13] in its behavior, while the weaker side will be more tempted by errors of overattention.

It should be said at the outset that all the common sources of misperception described by Jervis and others are present in asymmetric relationships. Indeed, if we consider Jervis's original fourteen hypotheses concerning misperception, some of them are particularly relevant to asymmetric relationships.[14] Especially on target is Hypothesis 5, 'When messages are sent from a different background of concerns and information than is possessed by the receiver, misunderstanding is likely.' Of course such situations occur even in symmetric relations, but the hypothesis would predict constant misunderstandings in an asymmetric relationship.[15] After all, each can only act toward the other from a particular set of relative capacities that is contrary to the relative capacities of the other. The relation A⇒B will be set by A's concerns; the relation B⇒A will be set by B's concerns. Without symmetry, iterated interactions are as likely to produce hardened (and negative) stereotypes of the other as they are to produce better understanding.

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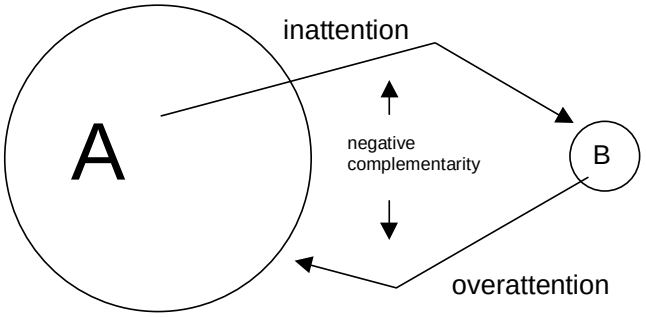
FIGURE 2
PATTERNS OF STRUCTURAL MISPERCEPTION



If we remain at the level of hypotheses concerning misperception by individual leaders, we can only say that asymmetric relationships are more likely to produce misunderstandings than symmetric ones. Of course, each misperception is made by a decision maker and can be analyzed as an individual misunderstanding. It is more interesting, however, to explore the possibility that there might be misperceptions characteristic of each of the two ends of the dyad. These structural misperceptions would not simply be random misperceptions whose frequency had been increased by structure, but rather systemic misperceptions specific to the A and B roles in an asymmetric dyad. Moreover, since systemic pressures affect the entire political communities of A and B, asymmetric misperception will warp the communal discourse. With systemic misperception, the common sense of the relationship in A and in B will diverge and become incompatible.

Figure 2 illustrates the basic pattern of misperception. The cardinal error for A is inattention. This is not to suggest that A should have the same regard for the relationship as B regardless of asymmetry, but rather that A is likely to err in the direction of not giving B the appropriate attention for the best management of the relationship. Conversely, B's cardinal error will be overattention. Again, B should be more attentive to the relationship than A, because B has proportionally more to gain and lose. But overattention can produce a less accurate understanding of A and of the dynamics of the relationship. Unfortunately, inattention and overattention in the two relational directions have a negative complementarity, that is, rather than canceling one another out, each will amplify the tendency toward the other. As Figure 2 indicates, the directional misperceptions will tend to bulge out from a hypothetical optimum understanding.

We begin by exploring A's inattention. It has two major aspects, A's misperception of B and A's unawareness of its own presence to B.

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First, because of B's relative unimportance, A is likely to be intermittent in its attention. Thus, actions that B intends as part of a sequence may be broken up by A's inattention, with some being ignored and others being distorted by lack of context. If the full attention of A's leadership is attracted to B only in times of crisis, then they are unlikely to appreciate the overall pattern of the relationship. If in a concert someone sleeps through the violins and wakes up suddenly with the crash of cymbals, the music will be misunderstood. A's 'B experts' are likely to hear the music, but they are located far below the decision makers and are called in to explain the cymbals, not the tune. Moreover, the actions that do catch A's attention are likely to be those relating other matters of importance to A. For instance, B's own military capacities will be less interesting to A than a possible alliance of B with C, if A is already worried about C. Ironically, then, in a crisis the very concerns that raise B to the level of urgency worthy of the attention of A's top leadership are likely to distort the understanding of what B intends.

Second, A acts in awareness of its own strength in dealing with B, but it also acts in awareness of B's relative unimportance in the context of all of A's other domestic and foreign affairs. This is an existential context very different from B's. B, by contrast, is vividly aware of its own opportunities and risks. What A might intend as a casual gesture of dissatisfaction or an expression of an extreme wing of its domestic political spectrum becomes a threat to B. The leadership of A might push B a bit to get B off its political plate, and B might misperceive A to be coming after it with a knife. B might in fact overreact, but its greater sensitivity corresponds to the reality of an asymmetric relationship, and A should expect it.

B's overattention is the most interesting dimension of misperception. If A's behavior towards B is relatively uncoordinated and is conditioned by other concerns, then too much attention on the part of B can easily produce misleading interpolations of rationality and extrapolations of consequences. A's inattention and diversity of partial actors will tend to produce a scattering of contradictory actions, and B's labors to connect the dots and thereby reveal the pattern of A's underlying intention may be wasted effort. More than that, the level of devious intelligence that B projects behind the dots will add an unnecessary layer of mystery to A's real capacities. Since risk is always more vivid than opportunity, interpolation is more likely to lead to paranoia than to unfounded optimism. B's microscopic approach to understanding A might also lead it to miss the subtle indications of a major shift in A's attitude from friendship to hostility and to underestimate the consequences of a climate change in the relationship. Besides problems of interpolation, B is likely to extrapolate A's possible actions beyond the actual parameters of A's general situation and other commitments.

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As modern theorists from Bishop Berkeley to Kenneth Boulding have noted, 'behavior depends on the image'.[16] If images are distorted by misperception then behavior will be correspondingly misdirected. If misperception is random, then mutual misperceptions might add a haphazard quality to the relationship, or perhaps even cancel each other out.[17] Unfortunately, in asymmetric relations, actions based on the misperceptions of each relational direction are likely to amplify one another. As A tries to bully B into acknowledging A's preponderance of power, B becomes too vividly aware of its vulnerability and paranoiac in its extrapolation of A's intentions. The stronger the urge of each side to 'do something', the more likely it will be that the action will be misinterpreted by the other side.[18]

As each becomes more embedded in characteristic and contrary errors, the actual mindset of the opponent will seem the least likely (and most contrived) explanation for its behavior. Consider a sequence of misunderstandings that roughly parallels the cases to be described below. B might irritate A, who then signals its powerful disapproval (but nothing more), and this is taken as a threat by B, who then moves closer to C. This rouses A's crisis attention and a more severe sanction is sent to B, who sees war alone against A as disaster, and therefore allies with C. B thus becomes a global threat to A and there is war. In principle, the sequence is reversible at each step, but in practice the negative complementarity of A⇒B and B⇒A makes each successive misperception more difficult to correct. By the time B is heading towards the alliance, it has cleansed its leadership of compromisers and quislings. By the time A consults its experts, it is looking for details (and scapegoats), not for general critiques of its crisis mindset by subordinates. The first victims of hostility on both sides will be those most sensitive to alternatives.

Beyond the Golden Rule

Clearly most asymmetric relations do not degenerate into war most of the time. If the tendency toward systemic misperception is present in asymmetric relations, there must also be factors than usually moderate and control its effects. Given the inconvenience of war, there is incentive to find a common reality of the relationship that permits accommodation.

The fundamental problem underlying structural misperception in asymmetric relationships is that the two sides are in very different situations vis-à-vis one another. The natural tendency to interpret and to behave toward the other as if it were oneself is therefore fundamentally misleading. The golden rule[19] can be the standard for symmetric relationships because the reciprocity that it implies is in fact possible. But to the extent that A and

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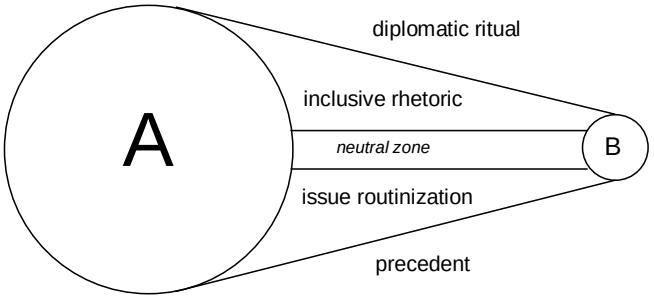
FIGURE 3
FACTORS MODERATING STRUCTURAL MISPERCEPTION



B's capacities and therefore orientations toward the relationship are different, appropriate behavior requires A to treat B as B rather than as another A, and requires B to treat A as A. This is a considerably more difficult pattern to sustain than a symmetric one. It requires the creation of a sleeve of expectations that can keep misinterpretations from bulging out of control, and the development of a core of discourse and routinization of dispute management that can neutralize potential occasions for misunderstanding.

The temptation to view an asymmetric relationship as a symmetric one plus or minus a power disparity is practically overwhelming. The self is so natural a standard of judgement, especially since it forms the communal discourse of the leadership of one's own side. Any other model of interpretation or standard of behavior has to be consciously constructed for the particular case. But in fact such relationships are constructed, in part out of the necessity for coexistence, in part from the accumulated wisdom of practical statesmanship, and in part from the sobering lessons of the costs of failure.

Figure 3 illustrates the four bilateral factors that moderate structural misperception and its effects in an asymmetric relationship. There are two major dimensions to the management of structural misperception and thus the prevention of vicious cycles of negative complementarity. The inner dimension is the creation and expansion of a neutralized core of policy areas in the relationship that are buffered from bilateral confrontation.[20] The outer dimension is the establishment of a sleeve for the relationship that makes increasingly radical misperceptions seem less plausible.

The neutralization of potential problem areas can be accomplished rhetorically through the use of discourse that articulates the vital interests of both sides, or through the conversion of issue areas to 'low politics' through

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routinization and institutionalization. Inclusive rhetoric might be dismissed as empty talk by the practically-minded, but especially in an asymmetric relationship – and especially in the A⇒B direction – it is of vital importance. If A simply talks to itself in explaining its actions and does not show regard for B's standpoint or interests, it puts the interpretive burden on B to understand that 'A is only being A'. By contrast, if A presents its action in terms and values shared by B, B is more likely to be drawn into a dialog rather than a confrontation. However, inclusive rhetoric is more than the universalization of A's own values. Self-righteousness is a projected parochialism; its pretensions to universalism are perceived by others as encroaching rather than inclusive.

To the extent that problem areas can be entrusted to joint commissions of experts or to multilateral bodies they are less likely to generate confrontational issues or exacerbate misunderstandings. The expansion of routinized low politics also affects the overall relationship by giving it a day-to-day inertia of matters that go rumbling and grumbling along without the direct involvement of central leadership. The shared values of the epistemic community of experts engaged in handling the problem should produce a common, 'objective' formulation of the problem area. However, just as inclusive rhetoric is not an impermeable boundary to misperception, so too the issues entrusted to institutionalized mediation are not immune to being picked up and transformed into confrontational issues. Institutionalization does not create a low politics lockbox. Different interests and capacities can be woven into a common effort, but when unraveling occurs the A and B strands will become clear.

If misunderstandings do occur, two forces work to constrain the negative complementarity of misperception.

First and most basic, the empirical record of the relationship provides precedents as well as 'teachers by negative example'. The longer the continuum of the relationship the less likely should be extraordinary interpretations of the present moment. A peaceful relationship creates the reasonable expectation of a continued peaceful relationship. When problems arise, people expect that these problems, like problems in the past, can be resolved. However, the continuum of history is by no means unbreakable. Many factors can be used to justify an attitude of 'that was then, this is now'. Moreover, precedents can be sorted to highlight those that justify extreme interpretations. B can cite previous instances when A has attacked, and A can cite instances of perfidy on B's part. Nevertheless, as long as precedent provides familiar ground for an asymmetric relationship, it provides a horizon of common sense that defines what is normal and implicitly places an increasing burden of proof on perceptions of the abnormal.[21]

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A second factor that can function as a ceiling of reasonable interpretations is the general practice of diplomatic ritual and exchanges of visits of state. These give official acknowledgement to respecting the other side in the relationship and to the importance of the relationship itself. Symbolically (and in the photo-ops) they place both countries side by side and draw a line of common interest around them. They are the opposite of a summit meeting, which presents itself as an extraordinary meeting of two heads of state in order to resolve outstanding problems (to bring home the 'deliverables') that presumably cannot be resolved at lower levels. Summitry tends to showcase the power of the individual leaders rather than the importance of the relationship. In ritual diplomacy, the major purpose is not the transactional content of the event, but the provision of an occasion in which A's acknowledgement of B and B's deference to A can be demonstrated and voiced without either prejudicing their cases on specific issues. Such ritual acknowledgement is important precisely because it is 'empty'. It provides a sleeve for the relationship within which the actual pushing and shoving of concrete disputes can occur without immediately raising the question of ultimate consequences for the relationship. The official exercises require the leadership of A to give more attention, and more regular attention, to B than would otherwise happen, and they require B to articulate its relationship to A in a general, non-crisis context.

If we reflect on the four constraints of structural misperception in asymmetric relations, it is clear that there is an ideological top and an empirical bottom as well as an inner core and outer sleeve. Ritual diplomacy and inclusive rhetoric are both aimed at enhancing a common mindset. Diplomacy sets the general framework, and inclusive rhetoric the articulation of specific issues. Likewise, the institutionalization of specific areas of problem management can be seen as the routinization of the historical continuum of the relationship. Over time, a common sense develops concerning recurring issues in the relationship, and the expectation that problems will not escalate permits the leadership to entrust them to expert commissions. A stable asymmetric relation does not flatten out the differences of interest and attention between the partners, but rather it creates a shared confidence in its own momentum.

Archetypal Cases of Asymmetric Misperception

The theory of asymmetry presented above is intended to be a general model, but the presentation has been simplified in two respects that may make the 'ideal type' appear remote from familiar realities of asymmetry. First, the model of disparity has been presented as a comprehensive and profound difference of resources in a dyad that is not affected by a context of other

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relationships. In reality, many asymmetric dyads are more complex (Malaysia and Singapore, for example), and they are often embedded in a matrix of other relationships that modulate the dyadic juxtaposition. The general utility of the ideal type is that it highlights and explicates a heuristic thread that can be found even in more complex cases. Second, while the pattern of asymmetric attention described in the first section above should be evident in all asymmetric relationships, even in the most friendly and well-established, the pathology of misperception with its whirlpool of negative complementarity is far more likely in novel situations in which previous 'common sense' does not apply, situations such as Indochina in the 1970s or the Balkans in the 1980s and 1990s. Again, the utility of analyzing the pathology of misperception is that tendencies in this direction can be better detected, and that the architecture of managing asymmetry can be better appreciated.

The cases to be presented below are not typical cases of asymmetry, but rather archetypal cases of asymmetric misperception. The argument is that the great disparity within the dyads in terms of population, economy and military strength made asymmetry a dominant characteristic of the relationships, and the novelty of an Indochina free from the global influences that defined its modern era meant that from 1975 new relationships had to be constructed. It is important to note that, unlike US–Cuba relations, for instance, the relationship is not complicated by a political disjunction. Moreover, in 1975 no party expected major conflict with the other. Although there were considerable ideological differences, all parties and party-states concerned were communist. Moreover, in late 1976 – in the middle of the interactions under discussion – China underwent an ideological sea change from Maoism to post-Maoism, and yet this had little effect on the course of events. So the cases are chosen to present examples of archetypal, pathological asymmetry, and the role of Vietnam as the weaker partner in one dyad and the stronger in the other makes them even more interesting.

The effect of systemic misperception is further highlighted in these cases by the structure of foreign policy decision making in communist countries. Because the disparities of interest and attention upon which asymmetric misperception is based do not rest on the interpretation of this or that leader but rather reflect the overall relative situation of the two communities, a foreign policy structure that is more cohesive is likely to exaggerate the systemic effects. Democratic centralism, which allows discussion only before decisions are made, forbids overt factionalism, and makes the media the mouthpiece of the Party, enmeshes each participant in a team perception that is particularly sensitive to shared feelings of threat or outrage. The proof of misperception does not lie in the diaries of Pol Pot or Deng

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Xiaoping, but rather in the emergence of pairs of contradictory and non-negotiable positions, both of which cannot be correct, and neither of which proved beneficial to its proponent.

The two dyads to be presented here, China and Vietnam, and Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1970s, are not unrelated, but their generic similarities are more significant than their interaction. Both situations began with committed alliances that culminated in victories in April 1975. Differences of interests within the dyads were evident before 1975, but after victory the relationships began to deteriorate rapidly, finally ending in war. Although no party has repudiated their role in resulting conflicts, from the perspective of 25 years later it is difficult to see any gains.[22] Nevertheless, even with hindsight neither conflict appears easily avoidable. All parties faced new relationships dazzled by their own illusions of victory. Little of the routinized inner core of the revolutionary relationship remained in place, precedent seemed irrelevant, and ritual became a sparring ground. By 1978, the smaller countries felt mortally threatened by the larger, and the larger countries felt threatened by the alliances of the smaller.

There are of course important differences between the cases. The Khmer Rouge was more aggressively anti-Vietnamese than the Vietnamese were anti-Chinese, and the Cambodian alliance with China was more immediately threatening to Vietnam than was the Vietnamese alliance with the Soviet Union. On the other hand, China's aid to revolutionary Vietnam was less obviously conditioned by its own interests than was Vietnam's aid to the Khmer Rouge, and China's border attack in 1979 was a limited action compared to Vietnam's invasion and occupation of Cambodia in late 1978. The point is not that equivalent actions occurred in both cases, but that both cases show clear patterns of structural misperception. The merit of considering both cases together is that Vietnam simultaneously plays the role of the stronger side vis-à-vis Cambodia and the weaker side vis-à-vis China.

China and Vietnam in the 1970s

Vietnam and China have a population ratio of 1:17, and in 1950 their GNP ratio, which is currently 1:35, was probably closer to the demographic ratio. So even as revolutionary brothers, there was no doubt who was the elder brother. Victory was celebrated by both China and Vietnam in 1975, and clearly neither expected hostilities to emerge. But each side had different illusions of victory.

From China's perspective, there was no longer a need for extraordinary efforts to aid Vietnam. Aid would continue, but its measure shifted from 'whatever is necessary' to 'whatever is convenient'.[23] Moreover, Vietnam

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no longer had a need for close relations with the Soviet Union, so Vietnam could be expected to assume a role of grateful and deferential independence.

Vietnam's idea of victory was quite different. Most importantly, Vietnam had just won a hundred-year struggle and a forty-year war for reunification and independence that had made it the center of world attention, and the sacrifices that the quest entailed drove the ideals of independence and self-importance to unrealistic heights. Moreover, and in a somewhat contrary direction, since the 1950s North Vietnam's state economy had become dependent on foreign aid, and from the 1960s its mass economy had relied on grain and other goods from China.[24] With victory, the Vietnamese leadership wanted to resume the socialist transformation of the north and require the southern economy to reorganize and catch up. The ambitious goals of the Fourth Party Congress in December 1976 were premised on the continuation of aid from the Soviet Union and China, as well as on Nixon's 1972 promise of reparations.

There was now also a great difference in the salience of the new relationship for China and Vietnam. In the middle 1960s the American war in Vietnam was a top concern for China as well as for Vietnam. By the middle 1970s China's leadership politics had been introverted by the struggle between the leftists of Mao Zedong's inner court and the returning Party pragmatists led by Deng Xiaoping. China was feeling the pinch of economic stagnation, and Vietnam absorbed half of China's aid.[25] In foreign relations, the new pragmatism of the 1970s was transforming China's diplomatic horizons. Alliance against Soviet hegemonism remained an organizing principle, but this now required the wooing of right-wing politicians like Franz Josef Strauss of Bavaria rather than the formation of leftist splinter groups. For Chinese foreign policy, Vietnam was more a successful historical episode than a future promise or threat. China expected deference from Vietnam, not trouble.

By contrast, with the defeat of the United States and reunification, China was the next greatest pressure on Vietnam's sense of autonomy. Vietnam did not want to be folded under China's wing. Rather than freeing Vietnam from the necessity of relying on the Soviet Union, victory from Vietnam's standpoint freed it from wartime caution and subservience in its relations with China. Vietnam did not feel hostile to China, but its task was to set the boundary stone between itself and its large, presumptuous neighbor in every dimension of the relationship, and to set it as firmly and as favorably as possible. It did not see the continuation of its relationship with the Soviet Union as siding with the Soviet Union against China, but rather as the model of Vietnam's idea of socialist internationalism: respectful, distant, and with generous aid.

If we recall the four factors modifying misperception in asymmetric relationships, trouble could be predicted. Diplomatic ritual had been driven by wartime needs and the global setting of the 'Vietnam War'; now the topic

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for summitry was aid, and that would be a sore subject. There was no outer sleeve for the relationship that would permit both countries to affirm benevolent intentions toward the other while not sacrificing concrete negotiating positions. Indeed, the existence of a 'language' of ritual permitted deft insults to be traded despite official friendship. Historical precedent, the lower part of the outer sleeve, was also problematic. Clearly, the establishment of an independent Vietnam in the modern era marked a new stage in the relationship. There were historical referents, but little historical inertia. And the historical referents were different. China saw the recent history of its generosity to Vietnam and overlooked the long past of its encroachments on Vietnamese autonomy. As relations began to cool in 1975 Deng Xiaoping sharply criticized historical references to Chinese incursions in the Vietnamese press.[26] By contrast, a leader in Hanoi could not walk outside without being reminded by some location or monument of heroic resistance to China, and he or she could not look at a map of Vietnam without being reminded that China was still there, only a hundred miles away. Since both China and Vietnam expected a new chapter in their relationship rather than merely a new paragraph, both – and especially Vietnam – looked at the whole course of history for inspiration. Instead of supplying a loose common law for the relationship, history amplified the misinterpretation of the present.

On the inner sleeve, there was little to neutralize issues of conflict. Inclusive rhetoric could not neutralize issues, because China's rhetoric of anti-(Soviet)hegemonism clashed with Vietnam's rhetoric of socialist internationalism. One could not sing the other's song without surrendering.[27] There were few mechanisms of conflict management in place because the wartime relationship had not been constructed on a state-to-state basis; between 'lips and teeth' no mechanisms were necessary. Moreover, although aid had created a considerable amount of contact between Chinese and Vietnamese, there was little commercial trade, and there were no groups on either side of the border with an established material interest in peaceful relations.[28]

Although the various issues in the relationship each had its own rhythm, they all fit into a general pattern of deterioration.

The first phase, from victory over the Thieu regime in April 1975 to Party General Secretary Le Duan's visit to Beijing in September 1975, might be called the honeymoon. While not very romantic, it combined the inertia of revolutionary solidarity with the desire of both China and Vietnam to woo the other into post-war cooperation on its own terms. A dramatic end to this phase was provided by Le Duan's stormy visit to Beijing and in particular his early departure and failure to host the customary return banquet. Although in retrospect the outlines of incompatible agendas were

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clear, there were still forces in the leadership of both sides that preferred accommodation. China agreed to new aid programs, although they were not as generous as the Vietnamese requested.

In the second phase, hardening of opposition from October 1975 to May 1978, the leadership on both sides became more univocal, and China's sanctions against Vietnamese impertinence thinned out the veneer of official solidarity. China rejected new requests for aid and lagged in the implementation of existing agreements. Meanwhile Vietnam removed from its leadership all ethnic Chinese, those who were sympathetic to China, and even members of border-area ethnic minorities.

Finally, in May 1978 China went public in its criticism of Vietnamese expulsion of ethnic Chinese, marking the period of open criticism that lasted until war in February 1979. It should be noted that the Chinese press is controlled to the point of regulating the terminology (*tifa*) permitted in articles, and no area is more sensitive than foreign affairs. Therefore the emergence of open criticism reflected a fundamental change in policy. Vietnam joined COMECON in June 1978 and signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation with the Soviet Union in November. In December it invaded Cambodia and quickly pushed the Khmer Rouge to the Thai frontier. China responded with the invasion and destruction of Vietnam's northern provinces in early 1979. After the brief but bloody border war, officially a war to defend the border but unofficially an effort to teach Vietnam a 'lesson',[29] there was a cold war from 1979 until official normalization in November 1991.

The unfolding of the Soviet issue strengthened the hawks on both sides and eventually provided a level of crisis sufficient to justify major hostility, but it was an issue grounded in misperception and ending in futility. China perceived Vietnam's unwillingness to join its opposition to the Soviet Union as an indication of hostility, whereas in fact – by China's own logic – continuing cooperation with both China and the Soviet Union was Vietnam's most reasonable course of action. If, as China claimed,[30] the withdrawal of the United States left a vacuum in Southeast Asia, few countries would have a greater interest in keeping a major power from monopolizing the area than Vietnam. But only China was positioned to dominate Vietnam against its will; the Soviet Union (or the United States) would have to be invited in. Chinese sanctions were therefore predictably counter-productive. Rather than indicate the negative consequences of a Soviet alliance, they demonstrated the reality of a Chinese threat. Moreover, there were many indications that Vietnam was unwilling to deepen its relationship with the Soviet Union to the point of alliance.[31] Not only did it resist Soviet pressure to join COMECON until the summer of 1978, but until the summer of 1977 Vietnam was as difficult and rude in its diplomacy

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toward the Soviets as it was toward the Chinese.[32] Vietnam also engaged in multi-faceted efforts to establish relations with its regional neighbors, international financial institutions, and the United States, though these efforts were hampered by its revolutionary rhetoric, its commitment to a command economy, and its unwillingness (until 1978) to give up on its expectation of $4 billion in reparations promised in the Paris Peace Agreement by the United States. By 1978 Vietnam felt cornered by China's hostility and the inability of its domestic economy to survive unassisted. If Vietnam were 'Asia's Cuba', as Deng Xiaoping put it, then it was because China presented itself as Vietnam's United States.

Vietnam's perception of China was equally flawed, but in the opposite direction. In contrast to China's overly global interpretation of Vietnam, Vietnam's interpretation of China was overly local. Vietnam interpreted China's anti-Soviet pressures as a deliberate attempt to isolate and dominate Vietnam. In the most extreme statement of Vietnam's position, a long internal speech given by Le Duan in the first half of 1979, Mao is described as wanting to take over all of Southeast Asia in order to settle excess Chinese there.[33] But it should have been clear that China's stance toward Vietnam was derivative from its global policy. To put it bluntly, from 1975 to 1978 Vietnam was not that important to China. The domestic transition from Mao and the Gang of Four to Hua Guofeng and Deng Xiaoping filled the agenda. Initially China encouraged the United States to restore economic relations with Vietnam[34] and called for peaceful negotiations between Vietnam and the Khmer Rouge,[35] both measures aimed at relieving Vietnam's 'vacuum' by diversifying its alternatives and reducing isolation. Moreover, since Vietnam increasingly acted as if China were already hostile, it underestimated the severity of China finally crossing the threshold of hostility. After China turned the corner in late 1977, it began to supply maximum aid to the Khmer Rouge, and in 1979 destroyed the northern border areas of Vietnam in the war and began to forge a regional and global alliance against Vietnam. Had Vietnam been able to stay on the cold side of friendship with China, its next decade would not have been as dark.

Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1970s

The disparity between Vietnam and Cambodia is less extreme than between China and Vietnam, but it is sufficiently large and comprehensive to be a defining feature of their relationship. In 1998 Vietnam's population was seven times that of Cambodia and its GNP was eight-and-a-half times greater.[36] The disparity in political capacity was larger than the demographic and economic disparity. Ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese were the main workforce of the commercial economies of Cambodia and Laos, and the minor functionaries of

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French Indochina were drawn primarily from Vietnam. Likewise, resistance to French colonialism was begun and led by Vietnamese. Although the Indochinese Communist Party fostered independence movements in Cambodia and Laos, the national liberation movement was viewed by Vietnam as a common cause led by Vietnam and fought on a common battleground. It was a relationship closer than lips and teeth. Vietnam's involvement in the founding of the Cambodian Communist Party led Pol Pot in 1976 to declare that the date when he became secretary general was hereafter to be considered the official founding of the Party. His explanation was that 'we must rearrange the history of the Party into something clean and perfect, in line with our policies of independence and self-mastery'.[37]

Given their later hostility it is startling to recall that the Vietnamese were the most important ally of the Khmer Rouge until victory in April 1975. Pham Van Ba, later Vietnam's first and only ambassador to Democratic Kampuchea, inducted Pol Pot into the Khmer Communist Party in 1953.[38] Though Pol Pot stayed in Cambodia, many Khmer communists relocated to North Vietnam after the Geneva Accords. Until 1970 Vietnam was in the peculiar position of supporting both Sihanouk and his leftist opposition, but then many of the leftists, including some of Pol Pot's closest allies, were in and out of Sihanouk's government. With the overthrow of Sihanouk and the alignment of Cambodia with the United States, Vietnam joined with China in supporting a united front of which Sihanouk was the figurehead, and Pol Pot was the leader of the Cambodian forces.[39] Even the *Black Paper* of Democratic Kampuchea, written in 1978 to expose the perfidy of the Vietnamese, admits that Vietnam supplied the ammunition for the final assault on Phnom Penh and that as late as June 1975 'the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Kampuchea still regarded Vietnam as a friendly country with which Kampuchea had differences ... [it] thought then that Kampuchea and Vietnam being liberated, the differences could be solved.'[40] Considering the context, this statement is conclusive evidence that the Khmer Rouge did not foresee inevitable conflict with Vietnam at the time of victory.

At the deepest level, Vietnam and Cambodia became alienated because Vietnam viewed Cambodia as part of a larger struggle centered on Vietnam, while the Khmer Rouge sought desperately an autonomous identity. Consider the following statement by Nguyen Khac Vien, one of Vietnam's most thoughtful and eloquent spokespersons:

> Their [the Khmer Rouge] greatest error was to regard Cambodia as if it was in a vacuum – isolated in its own territory. Had Ho Chi Minh thought like this, we would never have united with the Laotian and Kampuchean resistance forces in the struggle against the French colonialists and the Japanese militarists.[41]

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To Vietnam, Cambodia was frustratingly localistic in its concerns. But Cambodia did not have Vietnam's option of leading a regional struggle. It had only the option of being a subordinate part of such an enterprise, with every edge of its identity available for trespass in name of the common goal. Vien's golden rule was misplaced.

The *Black Paper* is such a raw expression of the illusions of the Khmer Rouge that their doubts about their own autonomy are transparent. 'During the period 1970 to 1975', so the claim goes, 'Kampuchea's revolution saved the Vietnamese who were like drowning men engaged in sinking.'[42] This is beyond falsehood. It is the banishing of a nightmare of insufficiency and dependence by publicly projecting its opposite. Likewise the claim that 'for the Vietnamese leaders, the problem of the liberation of South Vietnam was not their big concern. For them, the problem of [controlling] Kampuchea was far more important.'[43] Here the Khmer Rouge cope with the fact that Vietnam is their major problem by imagining that they are Vietnam's major problem – a golden rule mistake. In the end, the *Black Paper*'s over-estimation of Khmer Rouge strength and Vietnamese weakness led it to boast that Vietnam was not strong enough to invade four months before Vietnam's actual invasion and defeat of Democratic Kampuchea.

As with the post-victory relationship of China and Vietnam, the novelty of the relationship between independent Cambodia and reunified Vietnam and their contradictory illusions of victory made the amplification of misunderstandings inevitable. The moderating sleeves of the relationship could not function. High diplomatic ritual was clearly a terror for the Khmer Rouge, who feared assassination at every encounter.[44] Since their greatest concern was domination by Vietnam, public symbolism of common interest was seen as threatening. Similarly, the inner ideological sleeve of inclusive rhetoric heightened tensions rather than resolving them. While the allegations concerning Vietnam's proposal for an 'Indochina Federation' are exaggerated, Vietnam's post-victory rhetoric concerning Laos and Cambodia always included references to the unity of the Indochinese revolution and the 'militant solidarity' that had been formed.[45] As the Fourth Party Congress of December 1976 put it:

> Our foreign policy is ... to endeavor to preserve and develop the special relationship between the Vietnamese people and the peoples of Laos and Kampuchea ... so that the three countries which have been associated with one another in the struggle for national liberation will be associated with one another forever in the building and defense of their respective countries, in the interests of each country's independence and prosperity.[46]

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Until 1978 Pol Pot was quite reticent about publicly formulating a contrary rhetoric. Indeed, as late as mid-1976 he affirmed 'militant solidarity' with Vietnam, and in the many discussions of border incidents with the Vietnamese the Khmer Rouge tactic was to apologize for the incident and to blame it on ignorance or local error.[47] This tactic made useless the option of neutralizing issues by assigning them to specialized committees.

For Vietnam and Cambodia history was the resonating chamber of present concerns rather than a well-worn path familiar to both. Vietnam, of course, emphasized the recent path of revolutionary solidarity. Cambodia pointed out Vietnam's long history of southern expansion first at the expense of the Chams and then of the Cambodians. The Khmer Rouge freely re-imagined recent history to fit the mold of Vietnamese aggrandizement, and designated the new chapter of their history 'Year Zero'.

The most important motive for Vietnam's invasion was Cambodia's alliance with China. Somewhat to Pol Pot's surprise the China–Cambodia relationship survived the death of Mao in September 1976 and the fall of the Gang of Four a month later. Nevertheless, until mid-1977 China was still offering its services as arbiter of an Indochina summit, and Vietnam's 'Cambodia lesson' of December 1977 was aimed at punishing Khmer Rouge border raids rather than at Cambodia's foreign relations. But the rough reception that Pham Van Dong received in Beijing in June 1977 was, in retrospect, a turning point. Afterwards Vietnam prepared for a Chinese–Cambodian alliance by concluding a treaty of friendship with Laos, which Pol Pot in turn saw as the first step in an enforced Indochina Federation.

By 1978 the die was cast. China's Central Committee decided in December 1977 to 'give energetic support to Cambodia ... we did our best in all aspects, except for sending our own soldiers there.' And in fact more than 1,500 advisors were sent, along with complete equipment for three divisions as well as food, medicine and ammunition for 100,000 troops.[48] Vietnam began preparing a Cambodian government in exile that it could put into place. Pol Pot stepped up the executions of East Zone cadres and normalized relations with Thailand to create a rear supply area.

Ironically, as prophets of their own destruction at the hands of the Vietnamese, war proved the Khmer Rouge correct. For their part, the Vietnamese fear of Chinese involvement became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Moreover, Vietnam did achieve both its minimum war aim of security on its border with Cambodia and its implicit maximum aim of control of Indochina, but at the cost of insecurity on its northern border and an unsustainable international isolation. And the ironies continue. Today China is again a major aid and trade partner of a Cambodian government

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descended from the one installed by the Vietnamese, and Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos are all members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The major positive effect of the blood spilled in the two Indochinese conflicts of the late 1970s was that the illusions of victory were destroyed on all sides. China found that it could not coerce Vietnam, and Vietnam found that long-term enmity with China was difficult to sustain. Vietnam also found controlling Cambodia and Laos was not worth the price of international isolation. The Vietnamese occupation increased Cambodian distaste for Vietnamese, but the Khmer Rouge experience proved that hostility was unwise and that domestic evils could be worse. All parties found that, although they did not achieve what they had fought for, they could live with what they got. As a result, the 'normalization' of the 1990s is built on the solid foundation of the proven undesirability of extreme alternatives, and therefore is sturdy despite its novelty.

Conclusion: Asymmetry in Extremis, and Beyond

The cases just considered are limit cases in two respects. First, they are relationships of massive and comprehensive disparity. Second, victory, though celebrated by all parties, created a completely new context. In the modern era, these countries had never related to one another as independent sovereign states in undisputed control of their own territory. It was not an inherently hostile context since all parties had been on the same side. However, there were no moderating structures in place to contain misinterpretations and to neutralize issues. Therefore the cases present a clear picture of characteristic patterns of structural misperception and their amplification.

Vietnam is especially interesting because it plays its different dyadic roles vis-à-vis China and Cambodia rather than behaving consistently. While it is hardly surprising that Vietnam would have different policies toward China and Cambodia (one does not have to invade all of one's neighbors just to be consistent), it is clear that the big-country behavior that it assumed to be non-threatening toward Cambodia is precisely what it found troubling in the case of China. Vietnam tried to sanction post-victory Cambodia at the same time that China's similar policies were pushing Vietnam towards the Soviet Union. The turning point of the relationship with Cambodia was Cambodia's alliance with China, which Vietnam interpreted as an encirclement at the same time that it 'encircled' China by allying with the Soviet Union. Vietnam demanded deference from Cambodia while giving mixed signals concerning autonomy, while it demanded autonomy from China with inadequate reassurances about

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deference. The point here is not that Vietnam acted erratically. Indeed, in my opinion Vietnam was the more reasonable side in both dyads. The point is that in asymmetric relationships structure is a very powerful determinant of perception and behavior.

Although these cases provide the most striking illustrations of the model and its pathology, its basic logic covers more normal situations as well. Related dynamics can be seen, for instance, in the relationships of the United States and Canada, or of Germany and Austria, but usually they are veiled and modulated by well-established sleeves of common sense and routinization. It would also be possible to argue that asymmetric effects are proportional to disparity, though this would involve the difficult task of defining and calibrating disparity. Lastly, the model could be applied to complex cases such as countervailing disparities (China and Japan, for example), triangular relations (China, United States and Taiwan), or to systems of disparity (United States in the post-Cold War world).[49] All of these stronger and more complex arguments, however, require that the basic model be clear and plausible, and that has been a sufficient task for this article.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks to James Ceaser, Hui-wan Cho, Bruce Reynolds, Sophie Richardson, Paige Johnson Tan, and William Turley for comments on earlier drafts, and to friends in China and Vietnam for discussions during the gestation of these ideas.

NOTES

1. As an important contribution to and summary of the literature concerning this problem, see John Owen, *Liberal Peace, Liberal War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1997).
2. Kenneth Walz, *Theory of International Politics* (NY: McGraw-Hill 1979) p.94.
3. Ibid. p.27.
4. Ibid. p.131.
5. Ibid. p.95.
6. I am re-minting the word 'hieratic' to refer to relationships in which there is a structure created by different capacities but, unlike a hierarchic structure, it is not one of command. To save everyone a trip to the OED, let me add that this new usage is not related to existing meanings of the word, but rather is derived from removing the '-archy' from 'hierarchy'. The current usage of 'hierarchy' is already a long way from its philological home, and I reckon that another detour will not do much damage.
7. Since we are presenting the basic model, the dimensions of asymmetry and the breakpoints between symmetry and asymmetry are not yet at issue. Nevertheless, it should be noted that there are many bilateral relations where the disparities in population, economics and military power are congruent and so great that the basic model should apply.
8. In the Information Age one might question whether distance exists as a meaningful dimension. Nevertheless, relations between neighbors are likely to be more closely textured than distant relations. Shared borders introduce an intensely bilateral arena of opportunities and problems, and whatever costs remain associated with distance will be reduced to their minimum at a mutual border.

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9. By contrast, the Chinese Empire was an overt system of status differences with a subtext of actual autonomy.
10. The exception would be a situation in which B feels it is being victimized, and the unfairness of the victimization is underscored by the status difference.
11. This is not necessarily the case, since the leadership of B might feel cornered and desperate. However, B would have more reason to be responsive to a credible reduction of its vulnerability.
12. I would define 'misperception' as the most general term in a cluster that includes 'misunderstanding' and 'misinterpretation'. 'Misperception' would be the difference between a perception and the reality supposedly perceived. 'Misunderstanding' implies misperception of intent, and 'misinterpretation' implies misperception of meaning. Something that is 'misleading' tends to produce misperceptions.
13. It should be noted that 'inattention' here refers to the careful regard for B as B, not the amount of time spent by A debating 'the B problem' during a crisis. To the extent that 'the B problem' becomes larger than B itself, and to the extent that B itself would find it difficult to influence A's perception of 'the B problem', A is still inattentive to B regardless of the number of meetings or amount of paperwork.
14. Robert Jervis, 'Hypotheses on Misperception', *World Politics* 20/3 (April 1968) pp.454–79.
15. It would also predict more misperceptions in disjunctive relationships between countries with different ideological systems.
16. The quotation is from Kenneth Boulding, *The Image* (Ann Arbor, MI: Univ. of Michigan Press 1956) p.6. George Berkeley is less sanguine about the reality behind the image – even optical ones—in his *Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710).
17. As Arthur Stein has observed, not all misperceptions produce conflict. Arthur Stein, 'When Misperception Matters', *World Politics* 34/4 (July 1982) pp.505–26.
18. If we put the hardening of perspectives in terms of Jeffrey Legro's analysis of change in collective ideas, A's initial attitude would involve a continuity of overall attitude toward B despite increasingly trying to push B into line. To modify Legro's categories somewhat, A's initial attitude is that the relationship ain't broke, it's just running funny and it needs a kick. When A finally perceives B as part of a major crisis, A must 'do something', but now its policy toward B is derived from its new view of the larger situation. For B, the threshold of the transformation occurs earlier. Sanctions by A undercut moderate and cooperative views of A within B's leadership and strengthen alarmism, because the sanctions are interpreted as forebodings of a mortal threat. As B engages in further behavior that assumes A's hostility, it induces further sanctions that confirm the alarmist perspective. When finally the crisis comes that transforms A's policy, it provides the ultimate confirmation that paranoia was correct. To return to Legro's categories, A moves from Type 3 'It ain't broke' to Type 2 'Do something!', while B moves from Type 2 'Do something!' to Type 4 'Told you so'. Jeffrey Legro, 'The Transformation of Policy Ideas', *American Journal of Political Science* 44/3 (July 2000) pp.419–32, esp. p.427.
19. The 'golden rule' as used here might be rendered, 'React to others as if they were you.' This is hardly a 24-carat version of the rule, but even the most elegantly ethical versions rely on symmetry.
20. The neutralized core of an asymmetric relationship could be considered an expression of complex interdependence as described by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye in their classic work, *Power and Interdependence* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown 1977). What concerns us here, however, are the forms of constraint in a particular relational structure rather than the underlying common interests and means of protecting these interests that are present in all modern international relations.
21. This is an ironic reversal of Jervis's Hypothesis 2: 'Scholars and decision makers are apt to err by being too wedded to the established view and too closed to new information, as opposed to being too willing to alter their theories'. In this case, the beatitude might read, 'Blessed are the stodgy, for they are not likely to rock the boat.'
22. The exception would be the removal of the Khmer Rouge from power. Nevertheless, from the perspective of Vietnam's war aims Cambodia today is independent and its foreign policy has an anti-Vietnamese, pro-Chinese undertone.
23. The reduction in aid was forecast by Zhou Enlai as early as June 1973. See 'Zhou Enlai and Le Duan, Pham Van Dong and Le Thanh Nghi', in Odd Arne Westad, Chen Jian, Stein Tonnesson,

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Nguyen Vu Tung and James Hershberg (eds.), *77 Conversations between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964–1977*, Cold War International History Project Working Paper No.22 (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars 1998) p.191.
24. Adam Fforde and Suzanne Paine, *The Limits of National Liberation: Problems of Economic Management in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam* (NY: Croom Helm 1987).
25. See Westad *et al.* (note 23) pp.194, 193.
26. 'Deng Xiaoping and Le Duan', in Westad *et al.* (note 23) p.195.
27. This was painfully evident as early as Sept. 1975, at an exchange of toasts between Deng Xiaoping and Le Duan. See Kay Möller, *China und das wiedervereinte Vietnam* (Bochum: Studienverlag Brockmeyer 1984) pp.277–83.
28. Brantly Womack, 'Sino-Vietnamese Border Trade: The Edge of Normalization', *Asian Survey* 34/6 (June 1994) pp.495–512.
29. The 'lesson' terminology was used by China even during preparations for the invasion. See Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War after the War* (NY: Macmillan 1986) p.323.
30. Robert Ross, *The Indochina Tangle* (NY: Columbia UP 1988) pp.28–30.
31. See Gerhard Will, *Vietnam 1975–1979: Von Krieg zu Krieg* (Hamburg: Mitteilungen des Instituts für Asienkunde 1987) pp.67–8.
32. Chanda (note 29) pp.170–71 recounts a memorable instance, and mentions many other direct and oblique expressions of Vietnamese autonomy vis-à-vis the Soviets.
33. Stein Tonnesson and Chris Goscha, *Le Duan and the Break with China*, Dossier No.3 (Washington DC: Cold War International History Project, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars 2001), <http://cwihp.si.edu/tonviet.htm>.
34. Ross (note 30) p.15.
35. Zhai, p.212.
36. China's population is almost 16 times that of Vietnam, and its GNP is 36 times greater. To complete the picture, the disparity between Vietnam and Laos is roughly similar to that between China and Vietnam. World Bank, *World Development Report 1999–2000* (NY: Oxford UP 2000), Table I, pp.230–31.
37. David Chandler, 'Revising the Past in Democratic Kampuchea: When was the Birthday of the Party?', *Pacific Affairs* 54/2 (Summer 1983) p.297.
38. Wilfred Burchett, *The China–Cambodia–Vietnam Triangle* (Chicago, IL: Vanguard Books 1981) pp.53, 159.
39. Officially Khieu Samphan was minister of defense of the National United Front of Kampuchea (FUNK).
40. *Black Paper: Facts and Evidences of the Acts of Aggression and Annexation of Vietnam against Kampuchea* (Phnom Penh: Department of Press and Information of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Democratic Kampuchea 1978) pp.63, 75. In fact, the Vietnamese claim that they supplied the artillery and artillerymen for the encirclement of Phnom Penh after Mao had refused Pol Pot's request for them. See Burchett (note 38) p.144.
41. Quoted in Burchett (note 38) p.55. Vien, who now runs a children's hospital in Hanoi, was the author of many histories and other writings about Vietnam for foreign audiences. He gained new attention in the 1980s for his sharp criticisms of the lack of democratic reform in Vietnam.
42. *Black Paper* (note 40) p.64.
43. Ibid. p.51.
44. See 'Hua Guofeng and Pol Pot (1977)', in Westad *et al.* (note 23) p.196.
45. For careful discussions of this complicated theme see Chanda (note 29) pp.108–35 and Möller (note 27) pp.289–325. For Laos see Will (note 31) pp.47–53.
46. *Documents of the Fourth National Congress of the Communist Party of Vietnam* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Press 1977) p.151.
47. Will (note 31) p.51; Burchett (note 38) pp.145–7, 159–60.
48. 'Keng Piao's [Geng Biao's] Report of the Situation of the Indochinese Peninsula', delivered 16 January 1979, for high-level internal circulation. *Issues and Studies* (Jan. 1981) pp.78–96; here pp.85, 90. I have confirmed the authenticity of this document.
49. For regional and global analysis using asymmetry see Brantly Womack, 'How Size Matters: The United States, China and Asymmetry', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 24/4 (Dec. 2001) pp.123–50.